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Fate of U.S. Hostage Unknown

Terrorist Report of Slaying Of Buckley Viewed 'Seriously'

By Nora Boustany
Special to The Washington Post

BEIRUT, Oct. 4—U.S. Embassy officials said today that they were taking seriously a report by Islamic terrorists that they had executed embassy political officer William Buckley but said they had no confirmation of his fate.

The fundamentalist Islamic Jihad group reported killing Buckley, 57, early today in a communique delivered to local newspapers that was accompanied by an apparently recent color photograph of the diplomat, who was abducted 19 months ago. The statement, which gave no details of his purported death, said Buckley had been killed in reprisal for Tuesday's Israeli raid on the headquarters of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Tunis. At least 60 Tunisians and Palestinians died in the raid.

It said his body would be put "at the disposal" of the families of those killed in the Israeli raid.

The statement came hours before several dozen members of the 150-strong Soviet diplomatic community in the Lebanese capital were evacuated to Damascus, Syria, following the kidnaping of four Soviet officials Monday, the killing of one of them and the threat by another Islamic fundamentalist group to blow up the Soviet Embassy in Beirut by this afternoon unless the mission were vacated.

"We are taking the Islamic Jihad statement very seriously but we don't know quite what to make of it. He was not dead when the picture was taken," a senior U.S. Embassy official said.

[In Washington, President Reagan said the United States had no confirmation that Buckley had been executed, staff writer David B. Ottaway reported.

["Until we have something definite, we're not going to comment," he said.

[State Department spokesman Bernard Kalb said the government was "urgently" seeking additional information about the Islamic Jihad report but was still operating on the assumption that "all the (six American) hostages are alive."

[Kalb also said that the State Department learned in early August that another American, Steven Donahue, was being held against his will in Lebanon and has sought without success since then to establish his whereabouts and why he was being held. "Our understanding is that this is not a political situation and is in no way comparable to that of the other American hostages," he said. "There have been no demands made of the United States or any other government," he added.

[Donahue, Kalb said, has been in "frequent" telephone contact with his wife, Joanna, who lives in Hollywood, Fla. The American was reported yesterday to have been kidnaped by a right-wing Christian group in Lebanon while working on a book on the narcotics trade there and subsequently to have been taken from his original captors by a rival faction.]

The photograph of Buckley that was delivered this morning reportedly showed him looking haggard, with a gray beard. The Polaroid snapshot was a fresh one, according to photography specialists who closely examined it. Last May 15, Islamic Jihad distributed pictures of five of the American hostages, including Buckley, a native of Medford, Mass. Six U.S. citizens have been kidnaped in west Beirut since Buckley's abduction on March 16, 1984; one of them, the Rev. Benjamin Weir, was released Sept. 14.

Today's Islamic Jihad communique, delivered after midnight to two leading papers, An Nahar and As Safir, as well as to an international news agency, focused primarily on alleged American involvement in the Israeli strike against the PLO in Tunis. But it was also critical of PLO leader Yasser Arafat, who was thought to be the target of Tuesday's raid, along with Jordan's King Hussein and Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak.

After declaring that it had tried Buckley and found him guilty of being the Lebanon station chief of the CIA, the lengthy typewritten statement in Arabic went on to say that "since we know full well that America and Israel are responsible for killing Moslems in Tunis, and that this operation was organized and carried out under CIA supervision . . . , we hereby announce in revenge for the blood of martyrs, the execution" of Buckley.

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Islamic Jihad is a fundamentalist Shiite Moslem group linked to Iran. It has demanded the release of 17 prisoners held in Kuwait on charges of carryuing out a series of bomb attacks against Kuwaiti, American and French targets in December 1983.

Weir said at a press conference last month after his release from 16 months in captivity that Islamic Jihad was preparing to execute the remaining American captives if Kuwait did not free the 17.

There have been reports recently that the group would settle for the release of the two Lebanese among the prisoners in Kuwait.

The abduction Monday of three Soviet diplomats and the embassy physician by the Islamic Liberation Organization, a hitherto unknown group demanding that a Syrian-backed assault against the northern city of Tripoli be halted, came after telephone calls to western news agencies Sunday claiming on behalf of Islamic Jihad that some of the six American hostages in Lebanon would be produced at a press conference to convey a message to the American public and government. There has been no further word of such an appearance by any of the hostages.

The continuing Soviet hostage drama, the slaying of consular officer Arkady Katkov, whose body was found by Lebanese police on Wednesday, and the threat to destroy the embassy have confronted the Soviets directly for the first time in Lebanon with terrorism carried out in the name of Islam.

At the heavily guarded and fortified embassy this morning, between 70 and 100 nonessential diplomats, their families and Soviet journalists made their farewells to colleagues remaining in the Lebanese capital.

The evacuees left for Damascus in a bus and truck convoy guarded by Druze militiamen and Lebanese police, and will be flown on to Moscow.

Their departure came in the early hours of a cease-fire negotiated last night in Damascus between Syrian President Hafez Assad—who backs a number of leftist Lebanese militias attacking Sunni Moslem fundamentalists in the northern Lebanese city of Tripoli—and leaders of the warring militias.

The violence in Tripoli, the country's second largest city, has killed more than 500 people and injured more than 1,000 during the last three weeks. Prospects of the cease-fire were considered to be uncertain, and there was no word today from the captors of the remaining three Soviet hostages.

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